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ABSTRACT

Questions addressed in this paper include: what it means to be a successful teacher in poor, urban, ghetto areas; whether schools of education can prepare white, middle-class young men and women to be successful teachers in such areas; and if it is possible to prepare them, how to do it. Two case examples illustrate some unique challenges found in urban schools, and theory is cited from works by Gloria Ladson-Billings, Martin Haberman, and Beverly Cross. It is concluded that successful teachers on any level and with any group of students help students expand their vision of what is possible in their lives and help them to achieve it; successful teachers teach people, not simply technical proficiency or knowledge about subjects. It is further suggested that Schools of Education rarely place middle class, white preservice teachers in urban settings, thus they are unprepared for teaching in these environments. Even when teacher education programs claim to prepare preservice teachers to work in ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse settings, the programs tend to be descriptive rather than critical, presenting generalizations that reinforce rather than challenge existing stereotypes. It is recommended that teacher educators be willing to make a classroom of preservice teachers feel uncomfortable about their beliefs about race, class, and injustice if society is going to make it possible for a few of them to rethink their cultural and ideological heritage, so that they can become successful teachers of African American and other urban students. (Contains 10 references.) (NAV)

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"STAR TEACHERS" AND "DREAMKEEPERS": CAN TEACHER EDUCATORS PREPARE SUCCESSFUL URBAN EDUCATORS?

by

Alan Singer

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
(Chicago, Illinois, February 23, 1996)

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Suburban and Rural Universities/ Urban Teacher Education Placements: Preparing Pre-servive Teachers to work with Culturally Diverse Student Populations AACTE, Friday, Feb. 23, 1996, Astoria Room, 2:45-4:15 pm

"Star Teachers" and "Dreamkeepers": Can Teacher Educators Prepare Successful Urban Educators?

by Alan Singer

One thing we need to do is examine the euphemism -- urban education, which suggests that something is different about schools because they are located in cities. What we are really talking about are racism and class stratification in our society and schools that are oversized, under-funded and located in working-class poor communities; students who are largely non-white, many who are recent immigrants, from linguistic minorities and from single-parent households. Jonathan Kozol, in his book Savage Inequalities, gives a good description of the places we are talking about.[1]

We are not talking about preparing pre-service teachers to work in elite urban schools, though there may be reasons to use magnet schools or primarily middle class schools for urban placements. We are discussing the preparation of a largely white, middle-class, contingent of people so they can successfully teach working class and working-class poor African American, Caribbean, Native American, European American and Latino/a students, whether they live in cities, rural areas, or suburbs like Roosevelt, New York, a district recently taken over by the state Board of Regents.

Before I became a teacher educator, I taught social studies in New York City "urban" high schools with varying degrees of success. Jose Rodriguez and Rodney Miles were students in my United States history class. Jose was an over-age eleventh grader who became deeply involved in the class oral history project. He worked with a group of students that designed an interview schedule for the class and he interviewed his grandfather about migration from Puerto Rico. His interview was edited with assistance from other students, published in a school magazine, and included in an article about the use of oral history in high school social studies classes.

To the best of my knowledge, Jose doesn't know about these developments. Towards the end of the year, he stopped attending school. I called him at home and he told me he wanted to come to class, but that he was having "problems". The following year I met

Jose in the neighborhood. He was pleased to see me but also very edgy and embarrassed. Jose had become a crack abuser-- an "at risk" student who did not make it.

Rodney Miles is a Caribbean American young man who was active in the school's political action club and a member of one of its athletic teams. One morning, on his way to school, he was arrested by the Tactical Narcotics Task Force during a drug sweep on his block. Rodney was quickly released and no legal charges were ever filed, however, the affair left him extremely bitter. After Rodney barely completed his senior year, his mother and he decided that he should enlist in the navy in order to get out of the neighborhood. Rodney and I keep in touch and he seems to have created a life for himself.[2]

As teacher educators, we need to address three questions today.

First, what does it mean to be a successful teacher in the world of Jose Rodriguez and Rodney Miles -- a world where more young men are processed through the criminal justice system than attend college, a world where teen pregnancy is more than double the national average, a world where violence and AIDS are the largest causes of adolescent and young adult death?

Second, can Schools of Education prepare white, middle-class, young men and women to be successful teachers in this world?

Third, if we can, how do we do it?

We all share dissatisfaction with teachers who define success as keeping students in their seats, building administrators who are satisfied when there are no blow-ups that require police intervention, and district officials who function as bookkeepers tracking scores on standardized exams.

However, it is much easier to identify what we don't like about education in urban, largely minority, schools, than it is to agree on what constitutes successful teaching. For example, Gloria Ladson-Billings, author of The Dreamkeepers, Successful Teachers of African American Children (1994), argues that excellent teaching must be culturally-relevant. Of primary importance is the willingness of teachers to draw on the cultural strengths of students and communities. Meanwhile, in his book, Star Teachers of Children in Poverty (1995), Martin Haberman does not discuss the idea of cultural relevance. In addition, Haberman believes that schools need to be safe havens in communities where young people are continually

exposed to violence and abuse. Herbert Kohl and bell hooks, writing within Freireian and other social activist traditions, want urban teachers to be overtly political, to teach to transgress, so that students are empowered to defy social injustice in the classroom and in society. Haberman feels that teachers need to avoid "tilting at windmills" and concentrate their efforts on reaching students. While I agree with Kohl and hooks on the political nature of teaching, many of my pre-service teachers dismiss them, arguing that their view only works if your goal is to teach in a public school system for a year or two, write a book, and get out fast.[3]

The studies by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Martin Haberman are particularly useful for our discussion today. Despite differences in their methodologies and interests, their conclusions about what constitutes successful teaching, and their recommendations for Schools of Education, are remarkably similar, even in the areas where they appear to sharply disagree.

Ladson-Billings observed and conducted ongoing in-depth interviews with 8 teachers, 5 African Americans and 3 who are white, who were identified by both parents and supervisors as highly successful teachers of African American children. The social class of students and teachers, and its role in shaping their pedagogy, did not play a role in her analysis.

Haberman conducted thousands of interviews over the course of decades with a wide variety of urban teachers. His goal was to identify the qualities of the five to eight percent of the teachers he considers "star teachers of children in poverty." Though the children are largely African American and Latino/a and Haberman is concerned that teachers are aware of their own biases, he does not directly discuss the impact of race and racism on teachers or the role of a student's culture in the classroom.

Let's examine their disagreements first, and then some of the key points of agreement.

Haberman argues that children from impoverished urban communities are educationally disadvantaged because they lack models with an intrinsic love of learning. Ladson-Billings responds that the concept of educationally disadvantaged reflects a bias against cultural difference. Yet a fundamental characteristic of Ladson-Billings' culturally-relevant teacher is that they value their own learning as well as learning by their students. She feels that this quality is crucial for culturally-relevant teaching

especially for addressing the needs of African American students. I agree with Ladson-Billings' concern that the concept of educationally disadvantaged often masks cultural biases, but in this case, I think their disagreement is largely a semantic one. The key point is that they agree that successful teachers of urban/minority students must model the value and excitement of learning.

Another area of apparent disagreement is that Haberman is concerned that teachers hook students on learning, not on themselves, while Ladson-Billings believes that teachers should cultivate relationships with students beyond the classroom. I don't believe they are very far apart here either. Haberman also wants teachers to respect and trust students, be open and revealing about themselves in class, and be willing to express their concerns and admit their mistakes to students. When this kind of relationship is established, the artificial social barriers that Ladson-Billings is concerned with can be surmounted. Every teacher does not have to be involved with students outside of the classroom, but some teachers need to be in order to establish the kind of models that Ladson-Billings and Haberman want for students.

Ladson-Billings believes that teachers should be political beings. Haberman sees political involvement by teachers as a distraction from their investment in students. The main reason for this disagreement is Haberman's narrow definition of political behavior, rather than fundamental differences about the role of a teacher. Haberman's star teachers, who manipulate the system to protect their students from its stifling and demeaning authoritarianism, are continually engaged in essentially political acts. It is important to note that Haberman argues that star teachers act based on a broad ideological conception of what constitutes effective teaching. In my understanding, that kind of conscious exploration and decision making marks them as political beings.

The last major disagreement is a direct result of the different starting points in their studies. Haberman wants schools to be safe havens from community violence and societal abuse. Ladson-Billings believes that student life experience must be legitimized as part of the curriculum. From my reading of Haberman, he shares Ladson-Billings concern with including student home culture in the classroom curriculum. A teacher could not achieve any of the other goals he establishes if they reject who the

students are. Ladson-Billings is concerned with African American students who are part of a cultural community, a community which is defined by institutions, beliefs and familial relationships, not necessarily by a geographic location. Haberman is not negating the importance of this cultural community in the lives of African American and other minority children, but he is concerned with students who also live in desperately poor violence prone neighborhoods where these cultural values are under attack. A majority of African American children live in both of these communities.

Other areas where Ladson-Billings and Haberman agree on the practices that define successful teaching include: respecting the humanity of students; accepting responsibility for what takes place in your classroom; actively involving students in the creation of classroom communities; using a constructivist model for classroom instruction that builds on what students already know; using classroom community to establish behavior and learning norms; siding with students against a debilitating social and educational status quo; and recognizing that learning means empowerment and is the ultimate goal in class. This sounds to me like a Deweyian classroom, what would be excellent pedagogical practice in any setting. In addition, both Ladson-Billings' and Haberman's visions of successful teaching respond to concerns expressed by Lisa Delpit that teachers need to start from where students are, and not impose cultural assumptions that are based on experiences with middle-class white students from professional families who enter school with a different level of cultural capital.[4]

Drawing on the work of Ladson-Billings and Haberman, the kind of successful teachers we want our pre-service teachers to become is not very different whether they teach public school students living in poverty or in elite affluent districts. Successful teachers on any level and with any group of students do two things especially well. They help students expand their vision of what is possible in their lives. And they help students achieve it, whether what they want to do is assimilate and succeed, despite the injustices of the system, or challenge and change it.

Successful teachers teach people. They are never simply technically proficient or knowledgeable about subject and pedagogy. Few, if any, of us would tolerate someone as outrageous as Malcolm X's Mr. Ostrowski, who

despite his aptitude as an English teacher, felt compelled to advise a young Malcolm Little "to be realistic about being a nigger" when defining his career goals. Ladson-Billings and Haberman are saying that in more subtle ways, many teachers of African American and urban children are still doing the same thing.[5]

We need to turn to our questions -- can Schools of Education prepare teachers who model the value and excitement of learning; who are conscious political actors committed to the fundamental humanity and ability of urban/minority students; who see community in both senses of the word -- the cultural strength of urban minority children as well as the difficult geographic communities that they have to contend with -- and who are able to deal with their own cultural, racial and class biases.

The National Center for Research on Teacher Learning at Michigan State University and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education have both conducted to studies that are critical of current efforts by Schools of Education. NCRTL found that even when teacher education programs claim to prepare pre-service teachers to work in ethnically, racially and culturally diverse settings, the programs fail. Course work tends to be descriptive rather than critical and present generalizations that reinforce, rather than challenge, the stereotypes held by pre-service teachers.[6]

AACTE found that less than 1 in 5 teacher education programs require a placement in an urban setting where pre-service teachers can examine their assumptions about race, class and ethnicity. Most student teachers and field supervisors rate student preparation to teach in culturally diverse settings or with "at risk" students as either inadequate, or at best, as average.[7]

These studies suggest that Schools of Education are failing in major areas. They are not responding to research that shows the experiential aspects of pre-service student placements have a far greater impact on their later teaching practice than their university classroom preparation.[8] They also are not addressing the growing gap between the ethnic cultures of American students and teachers from the middle-class European American mainstream and the impact this has on the ability of teachers to understand and address the needs of their students.[9]

Gloria Ladson-Billings tends to be more hopeful than Martin Haberman about the possibilities for changing teacher education. She believes that extensive field experience in diverse communities, with model cooperating teachers, immersion in a community's culture and institutions, and intensive university involvement, can prepare pre-service teachers to become successful in African American schools. Haberman, who compares "completing a traditional program of teacher education as preparation" for working in an urban school "with preparing to swim the English Channel by doing laps in the University pool (2)," suggests that Schools of Education can only identify and coach prospective candidates.

One of the things I found most interesting in the Ladson-Billings book is her discussion of the three white teachers who she identifies as successful teachers of African American students. One of these teachers grew up in the African American community and Ladson-Billings argues that she retains an African American frame of reference. But the other two didn't.

One of these white teachers was a former Roman Catholic nun. The other was a Peace Corps volunteer with extensive experience in Africa. We are talking about two women with an ideological commitment, either religious or political, to service and social involvement, a commitment that directs their choices, shapes who they are, and influences the ways they perceive and are related to other people.

Haberman would argue that they are the kind of people that Schools of Education must locate and coach. While that is necessary, it certainly is not sufficient if we want to change the quality of education in urban/minority schools. The real question is whether Schools of Education can engage pre-service teachers, not all, but at least some, to emulate the "habits of mind" of these people?

In an article in Educational Leadership, Beverly Cross of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee discusses the difficulties she has working with a population of pre-service teachers who are largely Anglo, female and monolingual, who are from predominantly white, middle-class suburbs, and who often visualize education based on experiences in private, religiously affiliated elementary and

secondary schools with homogeneous student populations. Cross finds that these pre-service teachers are uncomfortable with and frequently want to avoid discussing their own experiences, feelings and beliefs about racial differences. She believes that in order to counter this resistance "teacher educators need to be transformed from thinking about what our programs mean for future teachers to what they should mean for the students they will teach."[10]

Cross suggests that it is not enough to be supportive of student teachers and model nurturing, helping and caring in our university classrooms. We have to treat our students as adults who will be professional educators when they complete our programs. Teacher educators must be willing to make a classroom of pre-service teachers feel uncomfortable about their beliefs about race, class and injustice if we are going to make it possible for a few of them to rethink our society's cultural and ideological heritage so they can become successful teachers of African American and urban students.

[1]Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities, New York: Harper, 1991.

[2]Alan Singer, "Every Student is At Risk: What Teachers Can Do To make A Difference", Democracy and Education, Spring, 1991, p. 7-12.

[3]Gloria Ladson-Billings, The Dreamkeepers; Successful Teachers of African American Children (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994); Martin Haberman, Star Teachers of Children in Poverty (West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1995); Herbert Kohl, I Won't Learn From You! (1994); bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[4]Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue. Harvard Educational Review, 58, 280-298.

[5]Malcolm X and Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcom X (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 36.

[6]Mary M. Kennedy. "Some Surprising Findings on How Teachers Learn to Teach," National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, Nov. 1991, vol. 49 no. 3. p. 14-17. College of Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034.

[7]American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, RATE IV, 1990. In a report, "Indices of Quality: Preservice Preparation and Clinical Training" (328.550), p. 32.

[8]Feinman-Nemser, S. (1990) Teacher preparation. In W.R. Houston (ed), Handbook of research on teacher education (pp. 212-233). NY: Macmillan.
Zeichner, K. (1986). Preparing reflective teachers. International Journal of Educational Research, 7, 565-575; Zeichner, K., Tabachnick, B., and Densmore, K. (1987). Individual, institutional, and cultural influences on the development of teachers' craft knowledge. In J. Calderhead (Ed.), Exploring teachers' thinking. London: Cassell.

[9]Cochran-Smith, M. (1994). Uncertain allies:Understanding the boundaries of race and teaching. AERA paper; McDiarmid, G.W. (1990). What to do about differences? Research report 90-11. East Lansing: MSU, NCRTE; Hilliard, A. (1974). Restructuring teacher education for multicultural imperatives; Asante, M.K. (1991). The Afro-centric idea in education. Journal of Negro History, 62, 170-180; Foster, M. (1990). The politics of race. Journal of Education, 172(3), 123-141;
Lee, C.D., Lomotey, K., and Shujaa, M. (1990). How shall we sing our sacred songs in a strange land? Journal of Education 172(2), 45-61.

[10]Beverly E. Cross, How Do We Prepare Teachers To Improve Race Relations?", Educational Leadership, May 1993, p. 64-65.